

## ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN

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## A Semantics Primer for Teachers of English

By WILLIAM J. SUCHY

Cicero, Illinois

**D**URING World War II we heard a lot about war plants that were "tooling up" for production. We learned from the newspapers that you don't just press a button to make a plan into a reality. First, words must flow in the form of laws and directives; then workable symbols emerge in blueprints and production charts; and, finally, men and machines turn raw material into the product that is needed. Thus, as the semanticist would say, we progress from many-meaning words like "war production" to few- or one-meaning words like "ships," "guns," and "planes." We move from words we can *think*, *feel* or *say* to words that name something we can *see*, *touch*, or *do*.

As teachers of English, we often forget that, in the classroom, we deal mostly with words-as-words rather than with words-as-things or words-as-actions. We *think* more than we see; we *feel* more than we touch; and we *say* more than we act. We go around in a circle of words as though one word, good or bad, deserves another. We get caught up in a method and never re-examine it.

Each lesson plan becomes a step away from real life instead of a step closer to it. In short, we forget that we, too, are "tooling up" for production—the life our students will one day take up, more or less on their own. Too often we stop at the blueprint stage. We teach the symbols, little patterns of what can be done, but rarely do we get down to productive teaching. We follow routine so much that we invite routine. To copy, to imitate, to gloss over: these are the bywords in education today.

What can we do, then, to avoid the vicious circle of education—words-leading-to-more-words? How can we crack through to the meaning behind the word? What does semantics have to offer in the schools, particularly in English, where language habits are formed? Most authorities will agree that direct teaching of semantics is "over the heads" of students below the college level. Teachers in the high school and, to a more limited extent, in the elementary grades may apply basic principles of semantics in many ways. The writer will outline some of the things that are being done to put more meaning into the teaching of English.

Semantics is, after all, a tool, a way of taking hold of reality; and all teachers are semanticists, perhaps without knowing it. Actually, teachers use and explain words so much that they stop questioning them. A non-stop flow of words is often called the occupational disease of the teaching profession. In this respect, teachers are like the salesman who is oversold on the product he is selling, or the radio announcer who becomes lyrical about the virtues of "Krunchy-Wunchies." Education, however, is not a kind of salesmanship; teaching deals with truth, and no substitute, be it ever so fancy, will do.

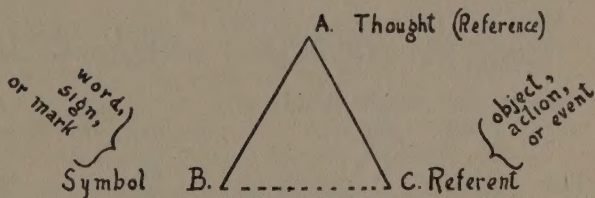
Semantics provides the teacher of English with a much-needed entering wedge to a truer understanding of words, and the world they speak of. C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards have set up a generally accepted "semantics triangle" which helps break through the "verbal circle" of words-leading-to-more-words.<sup>1</sup> Once the idea behind the "semantics triangle" becomes clear, the bad habit of laying words end-to-end and getting nowhere seems rather silly. Ogden and Richards have given Thought (or Reference, as they call it) a couple of legs to stand on. Since the Triangle of Thought (or Reference) is a subject in itself, this paper will avoid theory as much as possible and make the triangle simply a device with which

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1. Ogden, C. K., and Richards, I. A., *The Meaning of Meaning* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Co., Ltd., 1938), pp. 9ff.

to reckon the "meaning of meaning." The "semantics triangle," somewhat modified, may be shown as follows:

## TRIANGLE OF REFERENCE



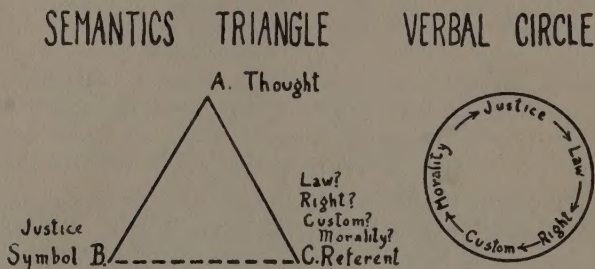
If we become familiar with the figures given above, we will find that the triangle tells us a good deal about the inner workings of language. Thus, there is a direct connection between A and B and between A and C, but not between B and C. The broken line at the base signifies that B and C do not connect but merely "stand for" each other. There is no direct connection between a word and an object, for example. Instead of showing a direct bond, the diagram represents Thought (or Reference) as straddling both the Symbol and the Referent and providing a connection between them.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of the triangle may be used to contrast a word-and-meaning that is easy to grasp with a word-and-meaning that usually gives a lot of trouble. If we take the word "brick," for example, we cannot go very far wrong. The Thought is simple; the Symbol is clear-cut; and the Referent is a solid something you can put your finger on. With a word like "brick," we couldn't run into a "verbal circle" of words-leading-to-more-words if we tried. But let us see what happens if we take a word like "justice." In this case, our own Thought does not come through clearly; the Symbol has no convenient handles to take hold of; and, at first, the Referent just *isn't*. We seem to start with words like "law," "right," "custom," and "morality," and go on and on to "life, liberty, and property," "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," and "constitutionality" without ever really making up our minds. We may ask, then, "What good is the triangle? It works on easy words; but on the harder ones, it breaks down." That is just the point. The triangle lets us know when the word isn't doing its job; it isn't really the triangle that breaks down, it's the word. The "verbal

2. Based on Ogden and Richards, *op. cit.*, p. 11.



circle" works the other way; the hazier a definition becomes, the more the circle functions as a merry-go-round of words that have less and less of the original meaning. Perhaps, a simple drawing will show how the *triangle* and the *circle* differ in their approach to meaning:



Our minds do not always take the long way around. Sometimes we take shortcuts in thinking that do as much damage as the "verbal circle." Ogden and Richards show how this is done in what they call a "sign-situation."<sup>3</sup> They use medical diagnosis to give an example as follows: a doctor (1) noting that a patient has a temperature (2) referring to a disease (3) decides that the illness is influenza. That kind of observation, based on a useful semantic principle, points directly to the meaning of meaning. Doctors are trained to think through sign-situations without making errors; most of us are not. Therefore, we often pass over important signs, a tendency which makes valid, step-by-step observation impossible.

The school aims to teach quickness of perception and accuracy of interpretation. Unfortunately for education, however, the public is guilty of "short-circuiting" a very basic sign-situation. In the matter of grades, pupils, parents, and, to some extent teachers and administrators themselves, have contributed to an attitude which, certainly, no school should tolerate, let alone foster. A paraphrase of the Ogden and Richards example, given in the last paragraph, will illustrate: a parent (1) noting that his child has good grades (2) referring to progress in learning (3) concludes that his child is doing well in school. If a parent observes signs and meanings in this order, he should be commended both for his intelligence and his interest in his child's welfare. But all too

3. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

often, the sign-situation is abbreviated as follows: a parent (1) noting that his child has good grades (2) concludes that his child is doing well in school. Now, this may be true, but notice that the second element, "referring to progress in learning," drops out. It seems, then, that as a parent becomes lax in his interest in his child, his powers of observation take a turn for the worse—which is, of course, just what we would expect. The result must be a false sense of values such as has taken over pretty much everywhere. Grade symbols, diplomas, and even college degrees acquire a distorted meaning if something real—like the ability to take knowledge and do something with it—drops out of our thinking.<sup>4</sup>

Semantics, then, shows up the fallacies in morals as well as in our thinking. This should appeal to teachers of English since they know how much literature reflects the various shades of good and evil in tracing the meaning of life. Literature may produce habits of thought and feeling that last a lifetime. The teacher faces two alternatives: either he can spoon-feed his pupils with his own pre-cooked judgments, or he can help them arrive at their own understanding of the meaning behind literary language. Most teachers try, at least, to follow the second course and will appreciate the following goals, suggested for students of semantics by Ogden and Richards: (1) what meaning is (2) how meanings are conveyed, and (3) methods of conveying meaning. These goals, as stated, are easy; but it does not follow that semantics is easy. One warning, therefore, cannot be repeated too often; namely, that pupils below the college level cannot understand semantics as such; the teacher must (1) apply the principles in situations that are chosen beforehand, (2) "set up shop" for the use of semantic tools in thinking, and (3) help the pupil to get the "feel" of semantic tools through composition exercises which emphasize meaning.

The English teacher has a truly serious duty to perform in bringing together a student's reading and his understanding and expression of his objective life. Korzybski feels that schools can develop better adjusted individuals through the application of semantics. He says that " . . . our actual lives are lived entirely on the objective levels, including the unspeakable 'feelings' . . . *the verbal levels being only auxiliary*, and effective only if they are translated back into the first order unspeakable effects, such as an object, an action, a 'feeling' . . . " <sup>5</sup> (See point C of the

4. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

5. Korzybski, Alfred, *Science and Sanity* (Lancaster, Pa.: Science Press Printing Co., 1933, 1941), p. 35, *italics mine*.

"semantics triangle"). In other words, the reading of literature is not enough; the student must take his impressions back to real life, insofar as he knows it. As the teacher develops the pupil's skill in the handling of semantic tools, therefore, he helps him to bring the "world of words" and the "world of not-words" into closer alignment. As a result of reading and composition with a semantics emphasis, the pupil should be able to " . . . distinguish between those novels, dramas, short stories, etc., which accurately portray the qualities, actions, and motives of human beings and those which misrepresent them . . . " <sup>6</sup> Such a pupil should be better adjusted to life as it is; that is, his thinking should be "extensional" or "reaching out" rather than "intensional" or "turning in" as is the case with those who fail to "tool up" for the problems of later life.<sup>7</sup>

Korzybski ascribes man's maladjustment primarily to " . . . the lack of correspondence between the structure of language and the structure of the world and of the human nervous system." <sup>8</sup> It seems that the sense of security that comes with an understanding of the *meaning* of our experience is one of the basic needs of the human organism. According to Jespersen, the "science of language" began when men first wondered why not everyone spoke the same language and why some persons had names with a simple meaning while the names of others had to be explained. The English teacher will do well to bear in mind these beginnings of semantics since they tell us a good deal about the formative mind of man. As the child explores the origins of meaning for himself, he wants to know more about the world of grown-ups around him. He wants to *belong*, and he wants the sense of mastery that comes with knowing the names of things. The first words learned by a child are names, and the list is as long as life. The English teacher should take special note of this naming process by which more and more referents are symbolized (see the "semantics triangle," points C and B) till they become the stock-in-trade of our minds. These names can "make or break" our understanding. Often a lack of a naming word will interrupt the step-by-step process by which a sign-situation must be worked out.

Significantly enough, semantics itself came into being when Michel Bréal, a Frenchman, gave it a name in 1897. Many princi-

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6. Moore, Robert H., "General Semantics in the High School English Program," Ohio University Press, 1945, p. 32.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 43.



ples of semantics had already been stated, of course; but, unquestionably, the name helped to create a new branch of language study.<sup>9</sup> It is no wonder, then, that R. P. Boas makes Shakespeare a semanticist when the great Elizabethan has Juliet complain with all the insight of a woman in love:

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet;  
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,  
Retain that dear perfection which he owes  
Without that title."<sup>10</sup>

The study of given and family names, incidentally, makes an interesting project for high school or junior high school English classes. The simplicity and novelty of the assignment recommend it, and the students usually show better-than-average interest in their most important Referent—themselves.

No one realizes the power of names better than the propagandist and the dictator. As one study of semantics concludes, "The demagogues know well enough what they are doing; is it too much to ask that American teachers know what the demagogues are doing?"<sup>11</sup> We need but look back to Hitler to see what the unscrupulous use of "labels" can do. Hitler appealed to the primitive source of our prejudices—our tendency to emphasize similarities and to ignore differences. Out of this tendency, which Korzybski calls "abstracting," Hitler fashioned two deadly weapons of psychological warfare—the names "Jew" and "Aryan."<sup>12</sup> Education, too, employs "abstracting" to center attention on basic truths which make men free. Teachers should point out the difference; propaganda pre-selects information to enslave the minds of men.

The school provides a good example of the pitfalls of "abstracting," and the difficulties to which a false "label" may lead. Thus, if a boy in the third grade " . . . forms a dislike for Miss Green, the teacher, he may, because teachers in later grades are also classified as teachers, transfer his dislike to all teachers."<sup>13</sup> Or a boy who is made to read *Julius Caesar* as "literature" when his mind is not ready for it " . . . may form a dislike for all writing called

9. *Ibid.*, p. 35. Bréal wrote a book on *semantique*, the science of meaning.

10. Boas, Ralph Philip, "Weasels and Chameleons," *Education*, Jan., 1944, p. 259.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 264.

12. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

*literature.*"<sup>14</sup> These boys do not judge each situation on its individual merits and, therefore, come to believe that what is true of one person or action must be true of the whole class. This tendency is the cause of Two-Valued Orientation, the *either-or* " . . . habit of responding favorably to all persons or events which are classified in one way and unfavorably to persons or events classified in some other way. . . . "<sup>15</sup>

The English teacher may combat the *either-or* frame of mind in several ways. First, there is the fact that Hitler conquered Germany with "labels" before he set out to conquer the world. This should convince the student that words can be used as weapons as well as tools. Our own political scene will illustrate the danger of classifying persons, actions, or events without referring to individual cases. Semanticists point to the sinuous, destructive words in our vocabularies, names like Jew, Polack, Irishman, Yankee, Armenian, Mormon, Catholic, Protestant, and Negro which submerge " . . . the individual in an indiscriminate and heterogeneous mass of hate and prejudice."<sup>16</sup> A few years ago, the editorial writer of a national magazine pointed out that Two-Valued (*either-or*) Orientation dominates our political life. The names "Fascist" and "Communist" are hurled back and forth as though no middle ground existed. The editorial writer concluded that, in the shuffle, the word "liberal" had lost its meaning. He said, "Alfred Korzybski, one of the fathers of modern semantics, is said to qualify words like 'liberal' even in oral discourse. He wiggles two fingers of each hand when he uses them indicating quotation marks."<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps, it would be a good idea to teach pupils the meaning of the "visible quotes." The semantic sign language would remind them that when they say a dress is "pretty" or a movie is "good," they are not referring to an object, or an event, or an action, but are merely giving their own opinions. Likewise, when they say, "Mr. Jones is a professor," they are speaking of a class rather than an individual. Korzybski suggests that teachers make pupils conscious of "abstracting" by urging them to say, "Mr. Jones *may be classified as a professor.*"<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Korzybski feels that

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14. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

16. Boas, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

17. "Some Big Words with Suggestions on How Not to Use Them," *Life*, Sept. 24, 1945, p. 32.

18. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 61.



pupils may be made aware of their own responses by saying, "The dress *appears* pretty" in place of "The dress *is* pretty."<sup>19</sup>

## II

The writer will conclude this paper with a discussion of semantics as it is being applied in high school English classes. One exercise has the avowed purpose of making "... students constantly aware of the vast limits of human ignorance. . . ." <sup>20</sup> The teacher exposes *either-or* thinking through popular generalizations like "Women are fickle by nature," "All men are beasts," and "You can't change human nature." The statements are torn apart and tested for validity. The exercise has been used successfully with ninth year students.

Teachers have experimented with proverbs to show their pupils the degrees of meaning. One freshman class in English was "... taught to detect 'multi-ordinal' terms in proverbs without the word 'multi-ordinal' being mentioned."<sup>21</sup> Multi-ordinal or multi-valued orientation is thinking along a scale of judgment. "Instead of 'good' and 'bad,' we have 'very bad,' 'bad,' 'not bad,' 'fair,' 'good,' 'very good' . . . ." <sup>22</sup> Students get the idea pretty well after discussing proverbs like "The pot calls the kettle black" and "Discretion is the better part of valor." Multi-valued thinking is the best antidote to the *either-or* tendency of the closed mind.

The metaphor is important enough for a separate unit of study. Even pupils who do not know the meaning of the terms "metaphor" and "simile" can appreciate implied comparisons. Words like "rat," "weasel," "louse," and "skunk" have become a part of our everyday speech. In his own words, the teacher can make the pupils see that "... the *primary referent* is that to which the word usually refers . . . ." while the "... *actual referent* is that to which a word refers in a particular instant."<sup>23</sup> It does not take too much semantics to make a pupil understand that a "rat" may be a two-legged or a four-legged animal, depending on the referent involved.

Easier exercises can be set up for the study of the newspaper, the magazine, and the radio. One junior high school has reported

19. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

20. Glicksberg, Charles I., "Methodology in Semantics as Applied to English," *School Review*, Nov., 1945, p. 546.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 548.

22. Hayakawa, S. I., *Language in Action* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1941), p. 131.

23. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

good results from a study of newspapers. "The aim of the experiment was to ascertain the ability of persons at a median age of fourteen to (1) weigh the reliability of news reports where referential terms had been misused, and (2) sense the affective or emotionally loaded language in newspaper editorials."<sup>24</sup> The general conclusion of the experiment was that ninth year students " . . . find it difficult to select the words which evoke stronger emotional reactions, yet 'sense' that they have been played upon in some way."<sup>25</sup>

The experimental nature of applied semantics on the high school level together with the need for greater correlation between reading, composition, and the study of meaning should remind us of that useful watchword in teaching: "Don't expect too much!" Perhaps, the same should be said of articles about teaching. This "Semantics Primer for Teachers of English," for example, has pointed out a great many difficulties that roughen the new road educators will have to travel. Semantics challenges the teacher to use the language of the old to explain the new. The task is a hard one, but the teacher should not forget the great asset he has in the child's desire to grow up. This inner drive towards maturity in every child stems from the wish for greater participation in the world of meaning. The child senses that grown-ups have certain seemingly mysterious powers to think and to act. He will strive to make that meaning his own. If the home and the school do not help him to find it the right way, he will find it for himself, perhaps the wrong way. If he is constantly rebuffed, he will find escape in reverie—away from the struggle for meaning. But the natural tendency of the child is to stay in the fight. The learner *does* feel a need to know the "meaning of meaning." That motivation is the strongest argument for the extension of semantics instruction in our schools.

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24. Feigenbaum, L. H., "An Experiment in Semantics," *High Points*, Feb., 1947, p. 76.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

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## ENGLISH NEWS

We'd like to start a news section showing what different English departments and English teachers are doing. We are all interested in new or unusual adventures of teachers, moves of teachers from one institution to another or from one department to another, unusually interesting meetings or lectures attended, and even personal bits, such as marriages, etc.

Won't you send at least one item every month to me, so that when the *Bulletin* copy must go in, there will be a fine column? Start today.

MARGARET E. NEWMAN  
Elgin High School  
Elgin, Illinois



### ATTEND THE ANNUAL FALL MEETING!

As this issue of your *Illinois English Bulletin* goes to press, various committees are making final arrangements for the annual fall meeting of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English to be held in Urbana on October 30. The program will have as its central theme the program of curriculum revision in the secondary schools, especially as it bears on the work of the English teacher. A business meeting at 9:30 and a main session at 10 o'clock in the Gregory Hall theater will be followed by a luncheon program at the Urbana-Lincoln Hotel. Make plans now to attend and to bring along colleagues who should join our association. Make your luncheon reservation on the form on the opposite page and dispatch it by return mail. Send no money. Tickets will be sold at the door at \$1.65 apiece.

### ATTEND THE NATIONAL COUNCIL MEETING!

When the National Council of Teachers of English meets at the Stevens Hotel in Chicago, November 25-27, one hundred outstanding leaders in the field of the language arts will participate in a lively program arranged for elementary, high school, and college teachers.

Opening the thirty-eighth annual convention, President Thomas C. Pollock, of New York University, will introduce the convention theme: *English for Maturity*. Inspirational and informative sectional meetings will point the way toward improved teaching in the fields of reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Curriculum revision, supervision, audio-visual instruments, radio, and journalism will be subjects for discussion in other sectional meetings. A feature of the program will be exhibition of the newest instructional materials.

Among the literary headliners already announced for the Annual Dinner and the closing luncheon on Saturday are Pulitzer Fiction Prize winner James S. Michener; Karl Shapiro, leading young poet; and Alan Lomax, the chief ballad collector in America.

## **Important Notice to Members of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English**

At the spring meeting in Chicago, the Executive Council and District Leaders discussed financial problems of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English. Although it seems inevitable that annual dues will have to be raised for the coming year, the Editor of the *Bulletin* was authorized to make an offer of membership *renewal* at the present rate of one dollar. If you wish to take advantage of this offer, simply fill out the blanks on the back of this sheet, enclose them, with one dollar (a bill or personal check), in the postage-free envelope, and deposit in the nearest mail-box.

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If you have developed a new unit or a new method of presentation of a topic or a new outline for your course or a new handbook, why not tell others about it. The *Bulletin* is anxious to receive articles from teachers in service in Illinois schools. Do share what you are doing with others! Send articles typed double-spaced to Charles W. Roberts, 204a Lincoln Hall, Urbana, Illinois.